

[St. Elmo W. Acosta]

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St. Elmo W. Acosta,

Formor Jacksonville

Park Commissioner,

133 [East?] Bay Street

Jacksonville, Florida,

[Rose?] Shepherd, Writer.

St. Elmo W. Acosta

Mr. Acosta was soon at his store, 133 [East?] Bay Street, corner [Newman?] and Bay Streets, a little late for his 2 p. m. appointment. His small white delivery truck, embellished with slogans in bright red, advertising the various brands of goods he sells to the hotel and restaurant trade of Jacksonville and [onvions?], has become a familiar figure to the local citizens as he personally delivers orders, and as soon as he had parked the truck he began giving rapid directions to his one assistant regarding supplies for special deliveries he was to make at the Beach later in the afternoon.

The assistant had just completed sweeping out the store and placing newly delivered cartons of goods in their proper places on the shelves, and was carefully watering a few plants in the sunny show window - a pepper plant, a small [sago?] palm, and an avocado

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tree about three feet tall. "I raised them from seeds," he said, as he carefully mixed a black powered substance with the soil in three pots. "This stuff is over a million years old. Got it from the plumber next door - he uses it in filters to purify the water - [counteracts?] the lime and makes it soft as rain water. He gets it somewhere up in the Pennsylvania coal fields. Mr Chic (Mr. Acosta's nickname) always likes to have a flowers and plants around." [???

Mr. Acosta coming in now, apologized for being late, stating he had a busy Saturday morning and that his orders were increasing from week to week.

Mr. Acosta is a heavy-set man about five feet nine inches in height, with olive skin, graying hair and small piercing brown eyes that look straight at you. He speaks rapidly, with his chin elevated and his head thrown back, and as he seated himself on the ledge of the show window, he added:

"Well, if we are going to make this a life history, we better go back to the beginning, or maybe a little before. I am a direct descendant of Pedro Menandes, the early Spanish governor, and my relationship comes down through the Alvares family. My great-grandfather, Antonio Alvares, was also a Spanish governor, in charge of the records and administration of affairs through authority from the Spanish crown. The Alvares family gave the bells to the Old Cathedral of St. Augustine, which are still a prized relic on the property, and have been frequently written about in articles on the ancient history of Florida. Those were my mother's ancestors.

"My great-grandfather, George D. Acosta, owned the 'oldest house' in St. Augustine, [which was?] sold to the St. Augustine Historical Society after the death of my grandmother.

"Just recently I turned over to the Jacksonville Public Library for the Florida Room, a letter written by Governor Alvares during a siege of St. Augustine by the English in the early days.

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"My father was George F. Acosta, and my mother was Ella o'Hara Acosta. I was born in Jacksonville on January 12, 1875. The family home was on the corner of Adams and Mariot Streets. My mother died when I was two years of age, and my father when I was seventeen.

"I started to sell papers - the Florida Times-Union and the Jacksonville Metropolis, the latter an evening paper, when I was 3 six years old, and I continued selling newspapers in my spare time until I was twenty-one. No, I did not make much, not that I didn't try, but we were not paid as much as the newsboys get now.

"When I was a small child, I attended the Convent School conducted by the Catholic Sisters at the corner of Main and Monroe Streets. Later I went through the Central Grammar School, and for a year or so to Christian Brothers College, a Catholic school for boys, at Memphis, Tennessee.

"When I was about fifteen years old I took a job as office boy with the Central Railroad of Georgia, in Jacksonville, and after a period of fifteen years' service, rose to the position of assistant freight agent. Then the agent died. In the adjustments following, I thought I was entitled to promotion to his position, but other arrangements were made, so I quit. I immediately engaged in the brokorage business, which I continued for ten years, then got stung by the 'political bee,'" he chuckled.

"I was elected to the City Council first in 1910, and re-elected in 1914.

"In 1913 I represented this district in the State Legislature for a period of two years.

"In 1919 I was elected a member of the City Commission, serving sixteen years.

"When a boy, I was always interested in gardens and flowers. I studied flowers, their likes and dislikes, and when I was elected to the City Commission, it was a great day to be made Commissioner of Parks. I always wore a rose in the lapel button hole of my coat 4

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and it was not a gesture of affection, but a genuine love for flowers that prompted me,” he said decidedly.

“One of the first things I did when elected to the City Council in 1910 was to try to get an ordinance through to purchase the Home Telephone Company. It was a dial system and could have been purchased at that time for \$106,000. If the ordinance had gone through, this would have been quite an asset to the city, and now we would be able to have this home-owned service at a very nominal rate. The system was later purchased and became a part of the Bell Telephone Company.

“While a member of the state Legislature in 1913, I advocated [azgreat?] deal of constructive legislation. One, a bill, was introduced in the house, but failed to pass the senate, required every county to plant 3,000 oak trees each year. If this law has been passed, the highways of Florida would now be shaded with double rows of beautiful oaks.

“I succeeded in having passed a law that the counties should pave and maintain a road through the main street of towns of less than [5,000?] inhabitants.

“Another law I advocated was that [?] subdivisions within five miles of a city should have their street paving in line with such city streets, saving counties thousands of dollars in having to change their paving, or build branch connections to adjacent subdivisions. The law, in modified form, was passed by a succeeding legislature.

“At my own expense I brought down two well-known city managers from Northern sections to study our municipal forms of government. I am an advocate of the city manager form of administration as a satisfactory and economical measure for the people, which, in a [great?] [part?] eliminates graft.

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“I presented a bill to the legislature to give to the city of Jacksonville title to all islands in the St. Johns River dredged up by government operations to widen and deepend the

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channel, between here and Mayport. These could have been formed into beauty spots for picnic grounds and outings, and in case of epidemics some could have been used for isolation purposes.

"I tried for years to get the island, only a few feet under water off Memorial Park, built up and made into a [?] driveway from Riverside to the [Ortega?] section.

"I started agitation for the St. Johns Bridge on September 4, 1904, and I passed House Bill No. 1 in the legislature in 1913 granting authority for the building of that bridge. I dug the first spadeful of earth when construction was actually started on September 25, 1919, and there's the spade," he said, pointing to rusty spade suspended in the show window. "The bridge was dedicated and opened for traffic July 1, 1921. I worked seventeen years for that bridge and spent about \$[6,000?] of my own money in efforts to get it established.

"The beach, or Pablo, as it was called in early days was not popular as a place of recreation because it was so hard to get to. It was a hard drive over the long sandy road. Later there was a shell road built through the Hogan section, called the Hogan Road, which was conducive to more traffic. But after the completion of the fine bridge across the St. Johns, a double concrete driveway to Jacksonville Beach was promoted by the citizens of Duval County, at a cost of \$[750,000?], with an additional \$400,00 for bridges across the several streams on the route. I gave deed No. 1 for the widening of the sand road to the double-track paved road.

"I advocated the planting of holly, oak, and magnolia trees 6 as a memorial to the soldiers of the World War. That did not carry, but my plan of city lightning for the beach road was put in operations.

"I advocated for years the building of a canal from the St. Johns River through Julington Creek and on down, and was one of the prime movers in the first plans for a cross-state canal.

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"An association was formed for the intracoastal canal through Lake Harney in the Leesburg section, in which I was also interested, and made several trips to Washington to get satisfactory figures on the cost. We now have the canal in satisfactory operation with an average depth of two and one-half to three feet, to accommodate shallow draft boats.

"At one time the site of Fort Caroline was offered for \$5,000, and I tried to get Duval County to purchase it and maintain it as a park for its historical value. They had the money and I was instrumental in having the law passed in the legislature to buy it, also went to Washington at my own expense in an endeavor to get the government to assist in the project. It was finally sold for \$70,000, and Duval County's goldenopportunity was gone forever.

"I advocated filling in the swamps between Jacksonville and the beach along the Atlantic Boulevard, about ten or twelve of them, making a series of islands and lakes on each side of the highway. Mrs. Jennings finally carried out the idea in four or five of these swamps, but nothing has been done towards their beautification.

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"Early in my term as Park Commissioner, I established the city nursery - the only one in the United States, by the way - where the city raises its own trees, flowers, vines and shrubs for beautifying of the city parks and streets, as well as furnishing them free to the citizens who wish to embellish their own premises. I have taken out flowers by the truck load to the parks, distributing them [gratis?] to the citizens, both white and colored.

"There are also other 'firsts' in my administration. I built the office building in Confederate Park for closer and more convenient contact with Jacksonville citizens. I built the first bridge - a concrete structure - across Hogans Creek in Confederates Park, also built the first comfort stations in the city parks; made possible the first free band concerts, and fought for a municipal band, which finally materialized in the Jacksonville Police Band.

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"I put in the first swimming pools and public drinking fountains.

"Years ago, at my own expense, I erected fifty concrete benches for people to sit on while waiting for streetcars along the route.

"As a waterfront park location, I advocated that the city purchase all the land between Market and Hogan Streets along the St. Johns, and beautify it as a city park. We do not use our wonderful waterfront as we should.

"One of the most outstanding system of parkways I advocated was a driveway two miles wide through Duval County, starting at the ocean at [Port?] George, with a bridge across the river, then along the canal and back around by Fulton in Atlantic Boulevard. My idea was to sell all but a half mile on each side of the road - dividing it into ten-acre homesites, which would have paid for the 8 the original cost of the right-of-way and maintenance. I would have had it planted for one-eighth of a mile with yellow jasmine, the next eighth with wistoria, and next eighth with another color, all native Florida flowers, and so on, alternating stretches each side of the roadway. It would have been a thing of beauty and [ntility?], and different from any other driveway anywhere in the world. Thus a man could have driven out Main Street, turned in, say Lemm Turner Road, then into a grand circle swing through the roads and connecting parkways to the ocean and back into Jacksonville.

"I remember, too, when people laughed at my idea for individuals to have their names on pins on their coats, as a gesture of friendliness, enabling people to more easily get acquainted. Now, the officers in banks have plates on their desks with their names in plain view, the floor men have their full name on pins on their coats, the barbers have their chairs marked with their names, and ladies wear pins with their initials on their dresses and handbags. Oh, well, how times change!

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"When I was a city commissioner, I advocated building an auditorium on the property owned by the city on Market Street and Hogans Creek, and at the last bond election, it was gratifying that of several sites presented, the people overwhelmingly voted for the Market Street location.

"I was also the prime mover in efforts to obtain the city-owned airport, golf course, and radio broadcasting station; also started the initial movement for the Municipal Books, and later their enlargement to their present capacity.

"Another thing I advocated was taking the sewerage out of the St. Johns River and putting in a reduction plant; also extending the present sewer away from Ortega along the St. Johns River and down the length of Memorial Park, doing away with the pollution of the 9 water in that section. In my opinion, the city will sooner or later have to put in a reduction plant.

"Another progressive measure I fathered was the construction of a span from Hogans Creek / connected with the St. Johns River bridge, which, if it could have been accomplished, would have relieved the congestion of traffic at Broad and Bay Streets, which is such an inconvenience at the present time.

"As another means of relieving traffic across the river, I firmly believe in the re-establishment of the ferry service. Mr. Gibbs still has the franchise and is perfectly willing to operate his former ferry service from the Flagler Street docks to this side.

"Former Mayor, John Alsop, and myself were the first to advocate the Riverside Viaduct and the Davis Street Viaduct, and I started things moving which later resulted in the establishment of the Beaver Street Viaduct, also the Duval Street Viaduct to the [east?] Jacksonville section, although Johnny Callahan actually completed the latter.

"I took over the city zoo when it consisted of a bear or two, a fox, and a few birds and an alligator, moved it to its present Main-Street location and made it into one of the best zoos

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in the country. I spent two years collecting three thousand dollars by public subscription and donations from school children to buy 'miss Chic' - the elephant - which has afforded so much pleasure to the younger element.

"During my administration I enlarged the city park system to a grand total of about 300 acres. I had all the land donated to the city for the widening of Main Street and [Talleyrand?] Avenue, and urged the buying of Boone Park, 32 acres, Kooker Park, 3 acres, and several other little parks where they were needed.

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"At one time, I spent three or four months walking the streets of Jacksonville, making memoranda of defective sidewalks. I would start out at five o'clock in the morning, so as to cover as much territory as possible without interruption. You see, a great many of the old time sidewalks were of large flat tile, which would sink during heavy rains, leaving holes. People would stumble and fall over them, then sue the city for broken bones and other injuries they sustained. Those got to be quite an expensive item. But with my notations as to locations, the defects were remedied, concrete walks replaced the old-fashioned tile, and the injuries and damage suits stopped.

"I had vestibules placed in the streetcars, so as to protect the motormen from the public; also instigated placing of asbestos curtains in all theatres, so as to insure safety to the public incase of back-stage fires, and framed a law preventing admission of public to any theatre unless a seat was available.

"Another city law I had passed was/ requiring the publishing of names of people when they changed addresses. Persons had the habit of moving, without giving their new address, making it impossible for people they owed to locate them, also causing inconvenience in mail delivery. Now a record is published daily by all transfer and moving concerns, giving names and address of persons whose goods they have handled, where moved from and where to.

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"As another feature of beautification, when I first entered the city council, I had passed an ordinance requiring telephone poles and trees along the sidewalks to be in line. This prevents the setting of a tree or telephone/ pole so as to jut out in irregular lines.

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"As a relief to heavy traffic, I advocated the building of a roadway along the Atlantic Coastline Railway from Dennis Street to Ortega, and I am pleased that the street is now being opened up along this route.

"I tried years ago to get the city to buy Commodores Point, also the [Reed?] Pearson tract, which measure lost by one vote. It would have been a great asset now as the navy air base. I even started to raise the purchase price myself of \$16,000, by obtaining subscriptions from individuals to be paid at the rate of \$8.00 per year, but it was too much of an undertaking for me and I let it drop.

"When I had money I used to subscribe to everything that came along. I donated \$1,000 to the St. Vincent Hospital building fund, and \$25.00 for the purchase of camp [roster?] as a commissary.

"Jacksonville at my first recollection was a town of about 6,000. When my family moved to a new home at First and Main Streets, I had great fun raiding the nearby orange groves. Seemed like I could never get enough oranges. Then we/ boys> to get in a boat and row down the river to a large estate below 'Keystone' the Episcopal Boys' Home, where there was a fine orange grove. One day the caretaker was a little too quick for us, and as we entered the boat, our pockets crammed with fruit, he shot several times, not at us, but in the air, so as to frighten us away. I yelled back at him - "Never mind, some day I'll own that place myself. 'so years went by, and it was a happy moment for me when twenty-eight years ago I put the deed for that twenty-five acre estate in my pocket. I suppose you may call that one of ambitions, for it was never out of my mind after I started to earn a substantial salary.

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"My family of three sons and three daughters has been reared on that place, practically. At first we only used it for a summer 12 home, then after the bridge was completed, it was more convenient to live there the year around.

"I now have about twenty acres, in bearing orange, [sataumo?], and grapefruit, also pear and plum trees. The other five acres takes in the homesite and some native and tropical plantings along the river. I have kept as many of the age-old liveoaks and magnolias as possible. Also have a number of native holly and the beautiful Christmas-berry tree. The old house is just as it has been for fifty years, with some needed repairs, but I did build a new porch around the east and [north?]. It has about 180 square yards of floor space, which Mrs. Acosta thought was going to be a lot of trouble to keep swept off, but I made the floor of red tile that can be easily washed with a hose. We have our own artesian well, with running water and hydrants all over the place.

"My oldest daughter is at home, and my youngest son, Chic, Jr., is going to school at the University of Florida at Gainesville. The other children are married, and all living in Jacksonville.

"Chic, Jr., often stands in front me, beats his chest and says: "Look at me, Dad: your son, and I never stole an orange in my life!' But I got right back at him with - 'Well you did not need to. I raised oranges for you in abundance.'

"He is away right now in/ Ann Harbor Michigan, where yesterday he entered a swimming contest. He has been champion in Gainesville and in the city meets, but after two days on the train, and with no opportunity to practice, he came in second yesterday. But this record will give him the privilege of competing in other college events," he said proudly.

"I forgot to say I was a passenger on the first mule-drawn streetcar, and I kept the other kids out by snatching their hats and throwing them as far as I could down the street, so they 13 would have to stop and pick up their hats. By that time the streetcar would be too

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far away for them to catch up. I also rode in the first electric street car. The first line went down Main Street and over Duval to Market Street, I mean, the mule-drawn cars, and the end of the line was Eighth Street.

"I used to ride a bicycle, the old style with the high wheel, and I won many a race at the beach.

"I also had a lot of fun playing baseball, and we boys played '[?]' - now they call it golf.

"We were living at Phelps and Main Street when the soldiers were encamped nearby during the Spanish American War period. I would have liked to join, but had no training, and they would not take volunteers. Wish they had, as now I could be drawing a pension," he chuckled at this.

"Yes, I've had a busy and interesting life. First a newsboy, then in the railroad office, my own business as a broker, the two periods as City Councilman, a session with the Florida State Legislature, sixteen years as City Commissioner, and now in the wholesale grocery business.

"It's 4 o'clock, now you'll have to excuse me" he said, apologetically, "as I have some fruit orders to take to the hotels at the beach, and I'll have to be hurrying along.

"If I think of anything else that should go in this history, I'll jot it down, and if you come by next Saturday, I'll have it for you.

"One incident I forgot. A little Japanese got off a [Olyde?] Line boat one day, and rushed out to my office in Confederate Park, asking - 'Are you mister Cheek Acosta' I told him I was, and he said: 'I came to you to learn of the Florida trees and flowers.' I told him he had arrived at the right place, and put him in my car, taking him out to the nursery where I explained everything as best I could, then rode him all over town showing him Jacksonville's homes with their beautiful lawns, trees and shrubs. That night when he left,

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he said" 'Good-buy, Mester Cheek. When I get home, I send you an oak tree like this - (indicating a height of about out eight inches) - 'four thousand years' old.'

"That was ten years ago, and I am still waiting for the 4,000 year-old oak. Maybe it got swallowed up in an earthquake, they have had two or three since then: or maybe it was destroyed in the Russian-Japanese War: or maybe the little fellow himself was lost in the conflict. But at any rate, I would like to have seen a 4,000 year old tree only eight inches high, wouldn't you?"

As he walked toward the open door, he glanced out and saw a Jacksonville police car with two officers driving rapidly west on Bay Street, and he said: "I nearly forgot to say that when I was a City Commissioner I initiated the movement to put patrolmen in automobiles, to enable them to get over beat/ more quickly. This has turned out to be a great thing, as now these cars are equipped with radio, making it possible to apprehend criminals more easily and in a shorter time, resulting in greater police efficiency.

"The biggest thing in my life? Making it possible the great St. John River bridge for the people of Duval County.

"And the greatest thing in my personal life is our beautiful home on the St. Johns River. This was originally known as the old Armstrong place, descending to his nephew, Oscar Von Valkenburg, who later sold it to Mr. McGeery, and I purchased it from him twenty-eight years ago."